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Simon Shaw-Miller and Sam Smiles, *Samuel Palmer Revisited*

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Simon Shaw-Miller and Sam Smiles, *Samuel Palmer Revisited* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 167 p, ISBN 9780754667476

1 This edited volume, which compiles chapters by leading historians and curators, aims at revising various clichés of Palmer's life and at reinstating Samuel Palmer (1805-1881) in the artistic context of his time, despite his legendary outsider status, and although his idiosyncrasies indeed repeatedly put him at odds with the dominant taste of his time.

2 In a very useful introduction, William Vaughan gives a panoramic overview of the critical reception of Palmer's work throughout history, and of how his art and personality were narrated by the successive art historians—from Kenneth Clark and Geoffrey Grigson to John Berger and Raymond Lister—distorting or, at least, shaping the public's understanding of the artist, and highlighting how his art came in and out of view according to the ebb and flow of academic and cultural fashion.

3 In a first chapter, William Vaughan studies the early formative years of Palmer, when nothing seemed to hint at his future "visionary powers" which were nonetheless latent. Drawing on neglected material and records, he starts by pointing out that Palmer lived as a youth in the Houndsditch district, a more urban, insalubrious and impoverished area than his birthplace and former home place—a fact that is systematically overlooked by Palmer's biographers and which may explain his attraction to idyllic rural settings. Vaughan also examines the diary of Benjamin Wrigglesworth Beatson—a classmate of Palmer's, two years older than him, and a regular visitor to the bookshop of Palmer's father—to draw information recording the Palmer household's life then.

4 In “Ancients and moderns: Samuel Palmer and the 'progress of watercolours', 1822-23”, Greg Smith focuses on Palmer’s earlier artistic period when, suddenly breaking away from his early conventional art, Palmer pitted his art against the development of watercolours, steeped in a triumphant progressive and nationalist discourse: this naturalist genre was deemed perfectly in accord with the humid atmosphere of the British isles. Palmer rejected watercolour as superficial, away from the unadorned grandeur and humble primitive sincerity needed by lofty art. He aspired to greater integrity and personal vision. Earlier on, Blake also had railed against the progressive paradigm of watercolours, adding that the outlines of a picture should not be obliterated in favour of colour. The works Palmer submitted to the Royal Academy for the exhibitions were flat monochrome watercolours, reminiscent of reproductive prints, with a deliberate absence of aerial perspective and naturalism. Yet he did resort to certain technical innovations of watercolours, and later, after the Shoreham period, he played down this early rebellious phase.

5 In “'This very unstudent-like student': Palmer and the education of the artists”, Martin Postle first explains why Palmer was disinclined to get a formal education at the Royal Academy, out of reluctance at the idea of having to copy laboriously and because he was not tough to cope with the ordeals of the Academy. He did attend the odd lecture by Flaxman or Fuseli, encouraged in this by Linnell. His awe-struck encounter with Blake strengthened his conviction that it was needless to conform to the Academy’s prescriptions and training. After his stay in Italy, he became a passionate teacher and took part in the debates around the founding of the Slade School of Fine Arts, which—all agreed—was to foster high art, unlike the Royal Academy. He put a lot of himself in his son Herbert’s education, whom he assailed with drills of all kinds with an academic *furore* in total contrast with his own free-spirited, casual and almost lax training—to the point that, ironically and sadly, his son eventually burnt much of his father’s work.

6 Christian Payne’s chapter deals with Palmer’s pictures of the sea, which are from the middle period of his life (1840s to 1860s), a corpus as yet unexplored by art historians. Palmer’s visits to Devon in Cornwall reminded him of his former stay at Shoreham and gave him opportunity for open-air sketching. His detailed and naturalistic studies of wave movements was in tune with the general fashion for this theme, at a time when photographers such as Gustave Le Gray and John Dillwyn Llewelyn were exhibiting their own photographs of waves in London. Like his friend James Clarke Hook, he also took interest in common events of British fisher folk, such as shipwrecks, or departures for long voyages and homecomings. Of course, works of such subject matter were more saleable, but they also resonated deeply and symbolically with his own life. His son Thomas More died at the early age of nineteen: the theme of a boy returning from sea or of shipwreck struck a personal chord of intense grief and emotional distress.

7 Paul Goldman’s text focuses on his work as a printmaker. His print production was very limited, yet the slow and intense concentration required by the technique suited him, all the more so as he believed printmaking to be an art form that was close to writing. Inspired by Claude, the all-pervading elegiac peace and suffused light were elements distilled from his Shoreham period and his tours of Devon and Italy. Unfortunately, the only illustrations Palmer did single-handedly were of Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy*. Although Palmer’s work does relate to some of his Victorian artist contemporaries, his very personal work is more akin to Blake’s and more rightly belongs to an earlier

period. Goldman also evokes Palmer's legacy, highlighting Graham Sutherland as the heir with the most similar inspiration.

8 In the last chapter, Simon Shaw-Miller discusses the pastoral in English music contemporary to the first world war, whom he says is not Arcadian, but darker and permeated by disquiet and the notion of death. After a technical analysis of the music of Alan Rawsthorne's (1905-1971) second symphony, Shaw-Miller gives a biographical account of Ralph Vaughan Williams, linking the tower under which he is buried with *The Lonely Tower* of Palmer, from whence Palmer grieved for his lost son. Similarly, *The Rising of the Skylark* is echoed in *The Lark Ascending* of Vaughan. Vaughan's *Pastoral Symphony* is "far from the cow-pat pastoralism" (127), and his inclusion of folk-music testifies to an anti-Wagnerian strain and to a radical anti-Bourgeois outlook. Shaw-Miller ends his chapter with David Matthews's (b.1943) germinal inspiration in *In the Dark Times* (1985) which brought about innovations in the pastoral genre.

9 Sam Smiles's chapter revolves around the influence Palmer had on a group of British printers in the early twentieth century. The Palmer revival was at its most acute in the late 1920s and early 1930s for engravers, and contemporary to the neoromanticism of the 1940s for painters, after which his influence faded. However, in the 1970s, Palmer's work was called upon to argue for the preservation of the Shoreham landscape threatened by the construction of the M25. He also received notorious attention because of the scandal of the forgeries by Tom Keating, who knew how to serve people with the formulaic paintings they sought—which gives us an idea of how much people had a simplistic idea of Palmer's work. Then Smiles focuses on his impact on students at Goldsmiths' group (William Larkins (1901-74)...) and other etchers working in the late 1920s and 1930s, who were alarmed at seeing the urban sprawl gnawing at what they considered the idyllic rural England. Their antimodernist conservative pastoralism jarred with the forces of modernization of contemporary England which Griggs thought led to spiritual impoverishment and spuriousness. Geoffrey Grigson's book (1947) covertly deprecates those artists for failing to grasp their times and for producing feeble, shallow and escapist art, even though—Smiles argues—their work is not a far cry from primitivist art trends (fauves...) that were also part and parcel of modernity.

10 This group of essays is deliberately fragmented and impressionistic, and refrains from giving a totalising view of Palmer's trajectory and viewpoints, in that it seeks to restore the complexity and contradictions of Palmer, away from the clichés art history has shut him in. As with any artist conservatively inclined towards the pastoral genre, it is tempting to label him in a very facile manner. But this volume refuses to manipulate his story for some greater art historical purpose, even if that means losing grasp of an univocal straightforward easy picture of the artist. One may regret the lack of colour illustration—since Palmer's paintings are valued for their bejewelled colours—, but it is also true that this volume dwells mainly with his black and white etchings.

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Mots-clés: aquarelle, Royal Academy, Slade School of Fine Arts, gravure, Shoreham Ancients, Goldsmiths' group, pastorale, eau-forte
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